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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

The Right to Feel Wronged

William C. Levin

My Uncle George was always fond of saying that the world (the whole thing, we assumed) was "going to hell in a handbasket." We never really knew what specific facts led him to this gloomy conclusion, but he seemed to believe that things were going pretty badly in the world generally, and for him in particular. I recall that he reacted this way when his wife, Ruth, reported that she had paid over a dollar a pound for the roast for that night's dinner, and when my brother quoted John Lennon's offhand comment that the Beatles had become more famous than Jesus. As he got older George's life contracted, like cellophane on a stove top. He went out less and less, kept his gas tank topped up compulsively, and generally hid and hoarded. I think it was his "mean world" view of things.

I have since noticed an increase in the number of Georges in America. In fact, I think I may have started down that path myself. I recently found myself "tisking" along with a few other uncle Georges about the sad decline in the quality of something or other. (Take your pick from among American film, music, architecture, television, food, sports, education, government or

moral worth.) I think I came awfully close to saying the country was going to...etc., but caught myself and decided to look a bit more closely at the phenomenon. After all, when I make a list I really can't think of too much to complain about in my life.

Are things "getting worse" in some vague and generalized way, or does it just give some of us perverse satisfaction to believe so? Clearly, neither George nor I could be proven wrong for believing this because the sense of decline and doom is too generalized. But we do have lots of data about specific aspects of our lives in America. Some of it contradicts the fears of our slide into the handbasket. But some of it does look pretty bad. It depends on one's outlook whether the data spells doom or not. And more importantly, it depends on the part of the population to which you belong. Some of us are doing pretty well and should stop complaining and give over the right to those who deserve it. Let me cite some of the data by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as produced in their yearly publication called *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. I'm using the 1994 edition for this.

Take crime for beginners. This subject is a sure-fire mutter-producer. Typically the complaint is that crime is out of control and that we are doing nothing to stop it. What does the data say? Well, it is true that most crime rates in America have increased over the last twenty years. For example, in 1970 there were 16,848 homicide victims in America (a rate of 8.3 homicides per hundred thousand members of the population), and by 1991 there were 26,581 victims (a rate of 10.5 victims per hundred

thousand Americans). That's about a 25 percent increase in the rate of homicide victims. But I contend that this is not quite a "hell in a handbasket" rate of deterioration. It's probably worth a big "tisk" at best. But it could hardly be said that we are doing nothing about increases in crime. Over the same two decades the number of Americans in federal and state prisons increased from 196,429 in 1971, (a rate of about 97 incarcerations per hundred thousand Americans) to 789,610 in 1991, (a rate of 330 per hundred thousand). That is an increase of over 340 percent and puts more than three quarters of a million Americans in jail. So our rate of incarceration is increasing twelve times faster than is our rate of murder. It's not clear that incarcerations will do anything to stem the increases in crime, but we are sure trying it. In fact, another table shows that rates of violent crime other than murder, which include rape, robbery and

No. 120. Infant, Maternal, and Neonatal Mortality Rates and Fetal Deaths: 1970 to 1991
(Deaths per 1,000 live births, except as noted. Excludes deaths of nonresidents of the United States. Beginning with 1981, fetal deaths classified according to the revision of the International Classification of Diseases, 9th revision, classified according to the revision in 1989.)

ITEM	1970	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991
Infant deaths	20.0	12.6	11.9	11.9	11.2	10.9	10.8	10.7	10.6	10.5	10.4	10.3	10.2
Maternal deaths	30.9	18.1	17.9	17.3	16.8	16.4	16.1	15.9	15.7	15.6	15.5	15.4	15.3
Fetal deaths	32.6	21.4	20.0	19.4	19.2	19.1	19.0	18.9	18.8	18.7	18.6	18.5	18.4

No. 133. Death Rates From Accidents and Violence: 1960 to 1991
(Deaths per 100,000 population in specified age groups. Excludes deaths of nonresidents of the United States. Beginning with 1981, deaths classified according to the revision of the International Classification of Diseases, 9th revision, classified according to the revision in 1989.)

AGE AT DEATH AND SEX	1960	1970	1981	1990
Male	27.1	26.7	24.4	21.2
Female	25.9	25.1	21.2	17.2

No. 339. Federal and State Prisoners: 1970 to 1992
(In Bureau of the Census estimated resident population, as of July 1. Prior to 1970, includes State institutions in Alaska. Represents inmates sentenced to minimum term of more than a year. See also Historical Statistics, Colonial Times to 1957, Table 1142.)

Year	Federal		State		All Institutions	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
1970	196,429	96.2	20,238	8.9	216,667	105.1
1980	315,974	159.2	38,111	14.4	354,085	173.6
1990	789,610	392.8	91,285	34.1	880,895	426.9

No. 307. Homicide Victims: by Race and Sex: 1970 to 1991
(Deaths per 100,000 resident population in specified race and sex groups. Excludes deaths of nonresidents of the United States. Beginning with 1981, deaths classified according to the revision of the International Classification of Diseases, 9th revision, classified according to the revision in 1989.)

Year	Total		White		Black		Hispanic	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
1970	16,848	8.3	14,111	7.0	2,737	16.8	0	0.0
1980	20,238	10.1	17,411	8.5	2,827	17.8	0	0.0
1990	26,581	13.2	22,811	11.2	3,770	23.8	0	0.0

No. 715. Money Income of Families—Median Income, by Race and Hispanic Origin, in Current and Constant (1991) Dollars: 1970 to 1992
(Lowest income, below \$14,000.)

Year	MEDIAN INCOME IN CURRENT DOLLARS				MEDIAN INCOME IN CONSTANT (1991) DOLLARS			
	All families	White	Black	Hispanic	All families	White	Black	Hispanic
1970	9,867	10,226	6,278	6,278	9,551	24,249	24,773	21,230
1992	22,884	24,249	10,226	10,226	22,884	24,249	24,773	21,230

PHOTO: MARIE DENNEHY

assault only, have actually declined. In 1973 there were 32.6 violent crimes per hundred thousand Americans, while the rate declined slightly to 32.1 per hundred thousand population in 1992. Handbasket, indeed.

What about our health? Well, it appears that the news is pretty good here. Life expectancy for an American male

born in 1970 was 67.1 years, while a female born that year could expect to live to be 74.7. By 1991 those figures had risen to 72 years of age for males and 79 for females. Much of the increase in life-expectancy can be traced to decreases in rates of infant mortality. Between 1970 and 1991 the ratio of infant deaths to live births in America dropped by more than half, from 20 deaths per thousand live births in 1970, to 8.9 in 1991. At the other end of the life span, we are living longer partly because we increasingly survive deadly illnesses. For example, death rates from heart disease have declined sharply. In 1970 there were 422.5 males who died from heart disease for every hundred thousand Americans, while the rate dropped to 292.6 by 1991. Among females, the rate was 304.5 per hundred thousand in 1970 and 279.5 in 1991. And death from accidental causes is down also. If you combine deaths from motor vehicle accidents, falls, air and train crashes, fires, accidental shootings, drug overdoses, electrocutions and so on (an unlovely list, if I've ever seen one), Americans are doing much better now than we did twenty years ago. In 1970 114,638 of us died of such causes, a rate of about 56 per hundred thousand. In 1991, 89,347 died of accidental causes, a rate of about 35 per hundred thousand Americans.

And, lastly, what about our economic well-being? Even here it looks like there is some good news to be found. The reports of disposable personal income, the money we have available for saving or the purchase of goods and services, has actually increased in the last two decades. The Bureau of the Census measures disposable income as personal income minus personal tax and nontax payments such as fines and donations. It would be meaningless to compare incomes in 1970 (when a good car cost less than \$5,000) with

incomes today. So reports of this sort are adjusted for changes in inflation by using constant dollars, in this case, the value of 1987 dollars. In 1970 the average American had \$9,875 in disposable income, while by 1993 the figure had risen to \$14,330.

If we take these figures seriously there is reason to doubt, or at least temper, the general belief that things have become unrelievedly awful in America. We are trying hard to fight increases in crime, our health and life spans are improving, and disposable income is up. But these figures mask the conditions experienced by subgroups within the country. The rise in some crime rates may be fairly low since 1970, but not all categories of Americans are equally likely to be victimized by crime. Go back to the figures I reported earlier for rates of homicide victims in the country. In 1991 the rate of homicide victimization for all Americans was 10.5 per hundred thousand population, up 25 percent from a rate of 8.3 in 1970. But look more closely at that 10.5 rate. In 1991 the homicide victimization rate for white males was 9.3 per hundred thousand population members, while for black males it was 72 per hundred thousand, nine times the rate for white males. For some Americans, then, there *is* pretty good reason to be worried about "how things are going." In 1991 of the 2,466 Americans who were in various prisons under sentence of death 1,450 (59 percent) were white and 1,016 (41 percent) were black. But since only 12.3 percent of the American population was black in that year the application of the death sentence to these two groups is extremely different.

The same sort of differences by subgroup are evident in data for health and income. It is true that for Americans generally life expectancy has increased in the last two decades, but it is still

the case that white males born in 1991 have an expectation to live to be 73 years old, while for black males born in that year the life expectancy is slightly less than 65 years. That eight year differential is essentially the same as it was back in 1970, (68 years for white males and 60 years for blacks). Infant mortality has been declining, but the differences by race persist here as well. In 1991 infant mortality for white Americans was 7.3 per thousand live births, while for black Americans it was more than twice that rate at 17.6. Both rates have declined sharply from 1970 levels, but the group differences persist.

The story is told again in the data for income, and in this case there is evidence that while the general population improves its position, racial minorities are worse off. In 1992 the median income of white families in America was \$38,909, up almost 12 percent compared with their 1970 median of \$34,773. Over the same span of years the median income of black American families actually declined a bit from \$21,330 in 1970 to \$21,161 in 1992. Another indication of the same trend is that between 1970 and 1992 the percentage of all black families who made less than \$10,000 per year increased from 20.8 percent to 26.3 percent while white families in this category remained constant at about 7.2 percent. If the American economy has been rising, it does not seem to have been floating all boats the same way. Clearly, some are leaking.

My Uncle George was a white, middle class man whose circumstances improved steadily through his life. He lived to his full life span, was never the victim of crime and made a solid, upper middle-class living. I guess it is clearer now than it ever was that people in his position should not be the ones who are pessimistic and complaining about how bad things are in America.

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